

The University of Chicago

THE CONFLICT
BETWEEN PRESBYTERIANISM AND
FREE-THOUGHT IN THE
SOUTH, 1776-1838

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

1937

By
CLARENCE EUGENE HIX, Jr.

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CONCLUSION

At an early date in the history of our country Presbyterian thought was known and respected. And from the beginning liberal views and irregularities were vigorously resisted.

The Presbyterian Church was for the most part a frontier church in the South. Yet in spite of this fact she demanded high intellectual standards for her ministers, and to a remarkable degree maintained them. Traditional emphasis upon an educated ministry made her the leader in higher education in this country, at least to the Civil War, an obligation that was admirably fulfilled, for by 1840 she had founded eleven colleges in the South, mainly for the purpose of training ministers. Even though these high standards resulted at times in schisms, the church was determined in its course.

As the purpose in founding these schools was primarily to train ministers, one would expect to find the curriculum to be set along very definite lines. Such was the case. If Presbyterianism was to be propagated, her tenets must be thoroughly mastered and her ministers trained in logic. Her system, they asserted, was used by the early Christians, and was the true system that was revealed by God through the holy scriptures. Therefore they had a definite mission in life to spread the "true faith" against all error such as Arminianism, deism and Unitarianism.

The Presbyterians were well aware of the low ebb of morals and religion in this country after the Revolutionary war. The General Assembly issued circular letters to the Synods and

Presbyteries in which they complained of the "abounding infidelity, --the profligacy and corruption of the public morals,--profaneness, pride, luxury, injustice, intemperance, lewdness, and every species of debauchery and loose indulgence" that prevailed in America. Out of their redoubled efforts to check these malicious influences the revival on the frontier was begun.

Free-thought, the foe of Presbyterianism in the South, abounded in this section of the country. It sprang from several sources: the influx of French influences resulting from the American and French Revolutions; the widespread deistic influence exerted by Ethan Allen and Thomas Paine which brought the orthodox teachings into disfavor; the American Revolution which tended to undermine morals and religion; the frontier conditions; the developing economic projects which brought together many peoples with varying religious beliefs; the weakness of the Established Church, as well as the numerous growing dissenters; and an interest in the classics among the cultured class. All of these worked toward developing the spirit of free inquiry.

The new state colleges springing up in the South were agents for fostering and disseminating free-thought ideas. William and Mary, the University of Virginia, the College of South Carolina, and Transylvania University were the most prominent centers of Southern free-thought. A college is like any other institution in that its greatness can be measured by the length of the shadow of some individual.

Thomas Jefferson was the most influential free-thinker in the South. It was largely due to his leadership and perseverance that religious liberty was gained in Virginia which set the pace for the other states. He was violently opposed to bigotry whenever it lifted its head and to the strictures demanded by creeds.

He said; "My opinion is that if nothing had ever happened to what flowed purely from his [Christ's] lips, the whole world would at this day have been Christian."

About Thomas Cooper, the brilliant self-exiled Englishman, was centered the controversy in South Carolina where he came after he had been denied (due to Presbyterian influence) a professorship in Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia. He was a close friend and admirer of Jefferson's; Joseph Priestly was his father-in-law. Cooper was a born controversialist and he proved to be the most formidable foe the Presbyterians had to deal with in the South. His attitude is excellently revealed in this sentence: "No religion is worth supporting that needs any other support than its own intrinsic evidence. Fraud and falsehood only dread examination." There is ample evidence that his influence was profound upon South Carolina thought both in the religious and political realms. He was far in advance of his age and was not fully appreciated by the Presbyterians who saw in him only a deadly enemy to their divine institution.

At Transylvania University free-thought was first introduced by Reverend Harry Toulmin. He remained only two years before his Unitarian doctrines forced him to resign the presidency; he accepted a judgeship in Alabama from Jefferson. Toulmin was soon followed by Horace Holley who in the nine years that he was president built the school into a great university. However, he too was forced to resign because of his Unitarian doctrines. His liberalism is shown in the following statement: "We want the means of a more liberal attention to theology as a science, not as an arena of sectarianism, or a magazine of poisoned weapons contrary to the laws of nations and of God." Such a viewpoint, of course, did not please the Presbyterians and as a result they

exhibited much bitterness and bigotry toward him.

The doctrines of Unitarianism most opposed to the teachings of Presbyterianism were: (1) human nature was pure and wholesome; it was not corrupt, and made vile by Adam's sin; (2) Jesus Christ was a great prophet but not coequal with God; and (3) Jesus' death did not affect human salvation by reconciling God to man as the Calvinists believed.

Once the Presbyterians were fully aroused over the spread of deism which in their minds led to infidelism, they succeeded in stamping out all free-thought in the South. The reasons for their ultimate success were: their growing influence and number; the aid they received from other denominations; the western revival which was begun by the Presbyterians and which caused Horace Mann, an early western educator, to remark that "the great West has been conquered, religiously speaking, from Black Hawk to John Calvin"; and to the growing sectionalism of the South as her political and economical interests came to be more and more tied up with the institution of slavery.

New ideas were not welcomed by the conservative Presbyterians. The entire body of truth, to their way of thinking, had been set forth in their Westminster Confession of Faith. Any deviation from its teachings was only warping the truth which had been so clearly stated. Thus the advent of Unitarian educators into the South mobilized the Presbyterians for action. The Unitarians proved to be more formidable opponents than the deists because their system of doctrine was more definite. The signal for Presbyterian attack upon this group was occasioned by Channing's Baltimore sermon in which he set forth the "Un-ty" doctrines, as the Presbyterians derisively called them.

Southern Presbyterian orthodoxy became interwoven with the

social, political and economic factors in this section in that it became an invaluable ally of the slave oligarchy. Indeed it furnished the most telling arguments for their "peculiar institution." The chief source of livelihood in the South was derived from agriculture. Cotton was the "money crop" and to produce it most economically Negro slave labor was used. Around the question of slavery arose most of the South's troubles. Thus coupled with the loss of prestige due to the weaning away of the West by the East, the South was put on the defensive. These factors added their bit in making the South orthodox in theology as well as in politics.

European influences were evident in the Southern conflict. The evangelical parties in Scotland and Northern Ireland found their counterpart in the South in the Reformed groups which included the New Lights and Cumberland Presbyterians. In both instances these groups developed over the differences of interpretation of their Confession of Faith. For example, the evangelicals in Scotland, the Marrow men, and the Reformed groups in the South, believed in the doctrine of universal atonement and that the believer was not under the law as a rule of life. They did not hold that the Westminster Confession was erroneous, but irrelevant to the more important duty of religion, namely, the salvation of Men's souls.

Similar methods were used in dealing with radical individuals in both countries and were typified in Scotland by the Simson and Hutcheson trials and in this country by the Craighead trial. Controversial methods used so effectively by Witherspoon in Scotland were introduced in this country with remarkable effect. He set the style in the use of ridicule against the arguments of his opponents. His Ecclesiastical Characteristics which was

written to ridicule the Moderates in Scotland shows the power of this form of attack. He came to America to accept the presidency of the College of New Jersey in 1768, and here many Southern Presbyterian ministers received instruction under him.

No contribution to theology was made by the Presbyterians either in Europe or in America, the reason being that they tried to harmonize everything with their Westminster Confession of Faith. Even the Moderate philosophers who were known as the Scottish realists let theology alone.

Deism and Unitarianism entered this country from France and England. Thomas Paine moved freely among the French liberals until he was arrested. His works were widely read and criticized in this country. The Virginia coterie with Jefferson as its leader, and later the Unitarian educators who came South were agents for disseminating free-thought in that section. They were in close touch with the state of intellectual trends in Europe. The outcome of the strife between orthodoxy and free-thought was similar in both countries. The spirit of the age seemed to be one of conservatism.

There is undoubtedly a general current impression that there was little or no free-thought in the South in this period. On the contrary the findings in the preceding chapters have shown that there was much free-thinking in this section during the early national period. This fact is not generally recognized because of subsequent events that made the South conservative. Due largely to the stiff-backed resistance of Scotch-Irish Presbyterian orthodoxy, combined with the peculiar economic, social, and political influences active in the South at this time, free-thought failed to flourish as it did in other sections of the country, and even to this day it can be said to have gained but a precarious foothold there.

